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Olien, J.L.; Rogelberg, S.G.; Lehmann-Willenbrock, N.K.; Allen, J.A.

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Chapter 2

Exploring Meeting Science: Key Questions and Answers

Jessie L. Olien

University of North Carolina, Charlotte

Steven G. Rogelberg

University of North Carolina, Charlotte

Nale Lehmann-Willenbrock

VU University Amsterdam

Joseph A. Allen

University of Nebraska - Omaha

Abstract

As a relatively new field of scientific study, many questions persist regarding meeting science. For example, what meetings science is, who meeting scientists are, and what distinguishes meeting science from other related fields of inquiry. The purpose of this chapter is to address these commonly asked questions. In this chapter we review what meeting science is, discuss the nascent nature of the field, describe who meeting scientists are and what they do, and disentangle the relationship between meeting science and team science. To close, we outline directions for future meetings research.

Key words: meeting science, meeting scientists, team science, future research

Meeting science is flourishing. As indicated by this volume, meeting science involves scholars from across multiple disciplines and the globe. Before reviewing chapters containing specific theoretical frameworks and empirical findings from the field of meeting science, readers may have some questions regarding what meeting science is and who meeting scientists are. These questions are addressed here. The purpose of this chapter is to address commonly posed questions regarding the nature of meeting science, the goals of meeting science, and the role meeting scientists play in advancing this field.

What is meeting science?

Decades ago, Schwartzman (1986) defined meetings as prearranged gatherings occurring between two or more individuals for the purpose of work-related interaction. Since then, Rogelberg et al. (2006) have refined this definition further, stating that meetings are purposeful work-related interactions that occur between two or more individuals, and:

1. These interactions have more structure than a simple chat, but less structure than a lecture.
2. Typically, meetings are schedule in advance and last, on average, from 30 to 60 minutes.
3. Meetings can occur in different formats. For example, meetings can take place face-to-face, in a distributed setting (e.g., skype, conference calls, etc.), or a combination of the two.

These definitions serve as useful starting points for understanding, operationalizing, and studying workplace meetings. However, as Allen, Lehmann-Willenbrock, and Rogelberg point out in the introduction to this volume, these definitions fall short of fully encapsulating both the depth and the breath of workplace meetings. When considering workplace meetings, it is important to understand that they are often much more than workplace gatherings. They are a site of social action and interaction that allow workplace members to produce and reproduce a department's, a team's, and/or an organization's vision, mission, and goals (Van Vree, 2011; Boden, 1994).

Therefore, meeting science is the conceptual, intellectual, and practical activity used to systematically study what goes on before, during, and after a meeting. Meeting science is the study of the meetings themselves, their outcomes, and other meeting-related phenomena. Meeting science is naturally cross-disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and trans-disciplinary. It unites researchers with diverse backgrounds and skillsets whose overarching goal is the same: to further the understanding of workplace meetings through rigorous scientific inquiry.

Is meeting science new?

Yes and no. The study of meetings as a focal and featured phenomenon in of itself is rather new. While Schwartzman (1989) called attention to the importance of meetings almost 30 years ago, only relatively recently have researchers began to focus on meetings as a direct object of inquiry (Rogelberg, Shanock, Scott, 2012). On the other hand, for decades small group and team researchers used meetings as a "container" for studying other phenomena of interest, such as decision-making, cohesion, group facilitation, group emotional processes, group development, and so on (e.g., Baltes, Dickson, Sherman, Bauer, & LaGanke, 2002; Gersick, 1988; Harrison, Price, & Bell, 1998; Kauffeld & Meyers, 2009; Van de Ven & Delbecq, 1974). While these previous studies have certainly made important contributions to our understanding of small groups and teams, they did not—and likely did not intend to—advance the field of meeting science. The latter requires a focus on meetings as a research phenomenon in its own right.

By using meetings as a mere context for other group phenomena, much of the past literature on meetings has largely ignored the importance of meetings as events in and of themselves that shape work, the organization, and the individual. Meeting science addresses this important oversight. For example, Rogelberg and colleagues (2006) used an interruptions framework to understanding how meeting demands (e.g., number and hours per week) relate to employee attitudes. By studying meetings in this way, Rogelberg and colleagues determined that time in meetings interacts with employee interdependence, accomplishment striving, and meeting effectiveness to affect job satisfaction. Studying meetings as a phenomenon in of themselves opens up a host of important research questions that meeting scientists have only recently begun to investigate.

What do meeting scientists do?

Meeting scientists are united in their belief that meetings warrant rigorous scientific inquiry. Using their diverse backgrounds, meetings scientists pursue three core areas of inquiry: what goes into meetings, what takes place in meetings, and what occurs as a result of meetings. This framework allows meetings scientists to study a multitude of phenomena. For example, meetings can be explored as a cultural and sensemaking phenomenon (e.g., Schwartzman, 1986), as a power and influence phenomenon (e.g., Barge & Keyton, 1994), as an affective phenomenon (e.g., Lehmann-Willenbrock et al., 2011), and as a communication phenomenon (e.g., Chaney & Lyden, 1997).

Meetings research naturally lends itself to interdisciplinary study, cutting across and integrating different disciplines. As such, meeting scientists come from a multitude of backgrounds. Often meetings research spurs collaboration between disciplinarily dissimilar scholars. For example, it is not uncommon for meetings research to be simultaneously investigated by scholars with backgrounds in business, industrial and organizational psychology, sociology, anthropology, and communications.

Due to the inherent interdisciplinary nature of meetings, it is a necessity that meeting scientist draw from different literatures to inform their current research. Because meetings topics are so highly interconnected with preexisting literature, they cannot be studied without proper integration of prior relevant research. For example, some meetings scholars draw from the groups and teams literature (e.g., Kauffeld & Lehmann-Willenbrock, 2012; Schulte, Lehmann-Willenbrock, & Kauffeld, 2013). Alternatively, others may pull from completely different areas of study, such social network analysis (Sauer & Kauffeld, 2013) or emotional labor (e.g., Shanock, Allen, Dunn, Baran, Scott, & Rogelberg, 2013).

Isn't meeting science the same thing as team science?

Meeting science is not necessarily team science. The key is the research question. What is the meeting researcher interested in studying? Some questions are indeed team science questions with a meetings focus, while others are meeting science questions completely independent of the team literature. By approaching the study of meetings as an event, as opposed to a container for emergent group phenomenon, different constructs become more relevant. For example, pre-meeting conversations are relevant to the study of meetings as a workplace event, whereas group processes are relevant to the study of meetings as a context for group behavior.

Meeting research includes a multitude of diverse foci, some of which extends beyond the scope of team research. If researchers only approach the study of meetings using a team science lens, whole swaths of organizationally relevant research would be missed. For example, consider the research questions posed by scholars investigating how meetings relate to organizational culture (Schwartzman, 1989), the factors that encourage emotional labor in meetings (Shanock et al., 2013), and the influence of meeting preparation on meeting outcomes (e.g., Cohen et al., 2011). All of these topics extend beyond traditional team science. While these topics may be familiar to meeting scientists, they may also seem somewhat foreign to team scientists. If meeting scientists solely approach meetings with a team science lens, they would miss these important areas of research. As these examples demonstrate, while team scientists may be meetings scientists, not all meeting scientists are team scientists.

Nevertheless, meeting scientists need not “isolate” themselves in order to distinguish meeting science from team science. In fact, it would be foolhardy to ignore the necessity of previous bodies of work outside the meetings space that informs future meeting science. Instead, meetings researchers must look to the research questions being asked to understand how interconnected their current research is with previous team science. Take, for example, a researcher interested in understanding how meeting processes are impacted by pre-meeting design characteristics (e.g., the role of an agenda). This research would require researchers with expertise in both the meeting and team sciences.

While we encourage researchers to avoid the false dichotomy between the meeting and team sciences, we similarly encourage them to be actively aware of the areas in which there is no overlap. Significant areas of inquiry, where the two sciences do not overlap, may be overlooked when meeting science is only recognized as a niche within a larger body of team research.

Is meeting science a niche science? Do we need to create boundaries?

It would be inappropriate for any researcher studying meetings to exclusively identify themselves as a meeting scientist. Quite the contrary, we encourage meeting scientists to link their research to whatever body of literature (or literatures) is most relevant given their specific research question. Ultimately it is the research question that dictates both which literatures should be reviewed/consulted and to what extent researchers should draw from them.

For example, when studying meeting culture, meeting scientists would need to use both organizational culture and societal culture literatures to form a basis for their propositions and/or hypotheses (e.g., Clifton & Van de Miroop, 2010; Meyer, 1993). Alternatively, if researchers interested in studying meetings processes excluded relevant teams literature, they would create an artificial separation between these two literatures. Imposing artificial boundary restrictions encourages disconnections in scholarship that could potentially harm the integrity and viability of meeting science.

Do we need more *meeting science?*

Yes, we need more meeting science.

First and foremost, meetings pervade workplace life. More than 25 million meetings take place every day within the United States alone (Newlund, 2012). Given the recent trend in the prevalence of workplace meetings, the figure is likely to grow. In addition, employees typically spend six hours per week sitting in workplace meetings (e.g., Rogelberg, Leach, Warr, & Burnfield, 2006; Schell, 2010). Meetings take up even more of the daily work lives of those in management positions. For example, managers not only spend time in meetings, they also devote work time to preparing for meetings and processing meeting results (e.g., Van Vree, 2011).

As meetings continue to permeate more of employees' everyday work lives, it becomes even more imperative that organizations understand how to design and lead meetings effectively. Meeting science provides organizational leaders with essential insights regarding meeting phenomena, meeting processes, and the outcomes of workplace meetings. More meetings research is needed to provide organizations with the insights necessary to implement effective data driven interventions.

Second, more meeting science is also required for theoretical and conceptual reasons. As mentioned previously, only relatively recently have meeting scientists focused specifically on meetings as events in of themselves. Instead, much of the previous meetings research has tended to view meetings as “containers”, as opposed to looking at them as important events and social sites in of themselves. This has led to shortcomings in the current state of meeting science.

As articulated by Scott and colleagues in the next chapter in this volume, these shortcomings limit the ability of scholars to develop and hone the theoretical explanations necessary to fully understanding complex meeting phenomena. To address this concern, Scott and colleagues propose that meetings can be conceptualized as stressors, collaborative technologies, cultural rituals, sensemaking episodes, and even as interventions. Conceptualizing meetings in this way – as constitutive organizational events – gives meeting scientists the space necessary to theorize in novel and innovative ways. By studying meetings as an event or social site, meeting scientists open themselves up to a host of new and pertinent research questions. As more meeting scientists adopt this model of theorizing, it is likely that meeting science will produce a broader range of findings and subsequently more effective practical recommendations.

Conclusion

In this short chapter we sought to clarify the nature of meeting science and how it relates to related areas of inquiry (e.g., team science). Let us close by sharing some key research questions in need of study in hopes of further developing meeting science. As a relatively young science, meeting science has a lot of room for growth and study. Although research questions worthy of explanation pervade this book, we will highlight a few here.

- How do pre-meeting factors and meeting design characteristics relate to meeting effectiveness? Similarly, which meeting formats – for example, face to face and virtual meetings – are most effective for different meeting purposes and goals? Relatedly, how may different formats aid in the facilitation of effective virtual meetings?

- What factors predict meeting burnout? How does meeting burnout relate to workplace attitudes, such as satisfaction and engagement? More broadly, how can meeting burnout inform our understanding of overall employee wellbeing?
- How do meeting expectations vary across cultural lines? Does the national context of the meeting influence how it is perceived and structured?
- How do meetings relate to the ongoing process of organizational sensemaking? What factors influence the verbal and behavioral interactions occurring before meetings begin? Similarly, in what ways does pre-meeting talk relate to the actual meeting tone?
- How can meetings help inform our understanding of the emergence of constructs such as group affect? For example, how can studying teams within the meetings context further our understanding of dynamic phenomenon – such as the feedback loops that exists between affect and meeting outcomes (e.g., cooperation, creativity, and performance)?
- In what ways do social and political factors affect information sharing and information use within the meetings context? For example, can lack of trust between meeting attendees or political motives lead persons to withhold or distort relevant information? How can understanding the relationships between meeting attendees better inform our understanding of information sharing within the meetings context?

- What factors affect creativity in team meetings? For example, what social processes facilitate creativity? What meeting characteristics may spur the development of creative synthesis and enhance the cognitive processes responsible for creative thinking?
- What is the interplay between meetings and organizational culture? Does meeting culture influence organizational culture? Does organizational culture drive meeting culture? What are the key attributes of meetings that are manifestations of the meeting culture and/or organizational culture?

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